

UNITED KINGDOM

COOPERATION, OPENNESS, PARTICIPATION, TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST ARE THE TENETS OF OPEN POLICY-MAKING

In the months leading up to the global launch of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in September 2011, the UK government, like other founding members, was engaged in a process of designing the OGP – what it should look like and how it would be structured.

'The initiative was still taking shape; we didn't know what it meant to work with civil society and they didn't know what it meant to work with government.'

explains Ilaria Miller of the UK Cabinet Office Transparency Team. To demonstrate their commitment to the partnership and its aims, participating countries need to develop National Action Plans, a list of challenging measures they are prepared to implement. 'This government was in a favourable position as transparency was at the

heart of the agenda being pushed by the Prime Minister and backed by a dedicated team in the Cabinet Office. Working with difficult time constraints, we drafted the UK OGP Action Plan to form an integral part of our UK government's new Transparency Strategy: Making Open Data Real. The consultation process was conducted in a 'classical way' with those interested in open data: it was published (on the government's website) and people were given three months to comment. According to Simon Burall of the NGO Involvement, 'the Government wrote the first National Action Plan with limited inputs and no multi-stakeholder participation. It was based almost entirely on the consultations it held for the Open Data process.'

'The whole process was underwhelming. To start with, civil society was not really aware of the OGP and there was very little engagement with government.

We were also poorly organised,' says Alan Hudson of ONE. All this changed after April 2012 when a number of civil society organisations found the funds to enable Involvement to lead and coordinate CSO efforts to drive forward the OGP. 'Involvement was interested in the whole plan and they had the skills and abilities to help CSOs to work together and to engage with the government. This has made a huge difference.' Following a critical analysis of the Action Plan and an open letter to the Minister, civil society lobbied for a different trajectory. Simon says:

'Our perspective was that there was too much emphasis on open data and the development of the Action Plan didn't allow for a participatory consultation process. There were lots of others bits that were missed and that should have been included.'

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- Ilaria Miller, UK Cabinet Office Transparency Team

'We took the criticisms on board and decided to do the next plan in a different way,' says Ilaria, 'we wanted discussions to be more organised and structured in order to make the dialogue more effective.'

The subsequent road to developing the revised National Action Plan, Open Government +, has facilitated an improvement, over the course of 2012, in the relationship between government and civil society; it has become more substantive.

'There have been hiccups along the way, and questions still remain, but the whole team in the Cabinet Office has done an excellent job of putting into practice the model of Open Policy-Making in its engagement with civil society,'

says Alan. Taking on the position of OGP Co-chair in September 2012 has been a further boost for the UK government, enabling it

to demonstrate its leadership of a major international initiative. 'We want to make the most of this opportunity and do a really good job,' says Ilaria.

Civil society representation involves a mix of organisations working on international development, transparency, freedom of information and access to information. Many of these organisations are interested in the OGP in relation to their work internationally and so have less immediate involvement with UK civil society on local issues. While the thrust of the plan is national, there are significant elements that highlight the UK's international responsibilities and its capacity to push for change. On the government's side, it has been important to reiterate the scope: 'The Action Plan is not the ideal platform for voicing all the issues and concerns of the international NGOs. It cannot

be a manifesto for international campaigning.' The majority of the organisations are London-based and while everyone recognises it would be a good thing to broaden the membership, 'how to do so remains unclear', acknowledges Alan. The newly created website www.opengovernment.org.uk is a hub that supports civil society engagement with the OGP – by providing a platform for sharing all documentation, for announcements and for keeping everyone abreast of the latest developments. In October 2012, over 40 organisations were involved in the Open Space discussions; various working groups, comprising members of civil society and relevant ministries, have since been established to discuss and develop the various commitments. Weekly meetings held with the civil society network at the Open Data Institute have been instrumental in getting the parties to sit down together to work on a shared endeavour.

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'I am really proud of how we're working together – being open, honest, consistent and coherent about identifying shared areas of interest and objectives,' says Ilaria.

The government is currently undergoing a self-assessment with regard to the commitments made in the first Action Plan. At the same time, details of civil society inputs for the revised plan are being finalised. These will be assessed in terms of government policy and priorities and a draft Action Plan will be ready for broader consultation in April. 'This document should be the overall vision for open government. It will have to have a strong open-data element, as this is where ministerial interests lie, but it will also have to link to other participation and citizen agendas,' Simon adds. And while it may be co-produced and co-created, the 'final decision will rest with the Minister. It's important to distinguish between current priorities and

priorities at a later stage,' Ilaria explains.

The plans for wider engagement and outreach remain work in progress, but the purpose of events within the UK will be to raise awareness and gather feedback from local and national actors. Identifying allies – be it the media, local authorities, businesses or civil society – will be important, as will the search for creative ways of engaging and connecting the components of transparency, participation and responsiveness, such that openness is seen to lead to results in terms of making a concrete change in people's lives. This remains the ultimate test of open policy-making processes.

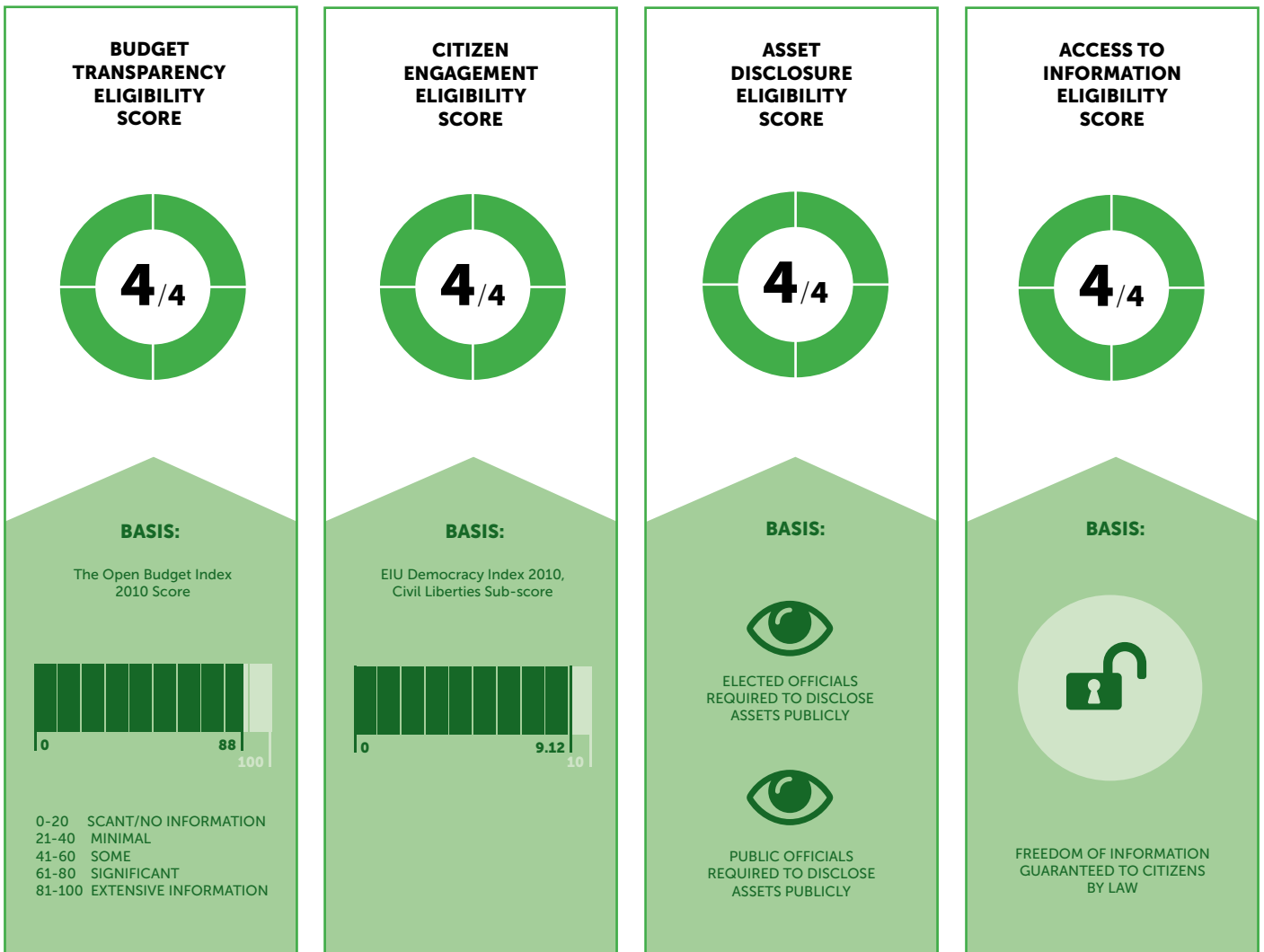
🔗 For more information or to get in touch with one of the people interviewed, please e-mail nvaart@hivos.nl.

OGP MEMBER SINCE:
September 2011

CURRENT STAGE:
2nd Action Plan

OGP SITE:
<http://www.opengovernment.org.uk/>

UK OGP ELIGIBILITY DATASHEET



TOTAL OGP ELIGIBILITY SCORE: **16/16**

